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Liberty Ashore

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Liberty Ashore

by Dan Taylor

NOW HEAR THIS. NOW HEAR THIS. ALL MARINE PERSONNEL WHO STOOD THE WATCH FROM 2000 TO 0400 HOURS LAST NIGHT WILL HAVE LIBERTY ASHORE TODAY FROM 1300 TO 1700 HOURS I REPEAT . . .

But there was no need of repetition for Private Jerry Conway. At the first sounds from the bitch-box, he had jerked up from the top rack, banged his head on the pipes, rolled out and fallen, sprawling on the deck ten feet below. Before the message ended, he had scrambled up and over to the bulkhead and was pawing seabags to reach his own.

Glad I didn't throw any of those drunks down the ladderwell last night, he thought. I was pretty disgusted, having to help those guys and listen to their drunken reveries — and all the time thinking I wasn't going to get to go ashore. "Hey, Don, can I borrow your shoe polish?" But this is better. All they saw was the night life. That's the same anywhere. Me, I'm going to see the Orient. Guess I'll skip chow and eat ashore; have to press these greens.

Standing at the gangway waiting for liberty call to go, Private Conway looked even younger than his eighteen years. His one hundred and fifty pound, five foot nine inch body

was small compared to that of the sailor there chipping paint. The closely-cropped hair showing beneath the garrison cap and the smooth complexion did nothing to age him either. The National Defense ribbon he wore looked alone and ludicrous on his chest. But he carried his lean body with ease and now and then a flicker of cockiness stole across his features indicating that all the training had not been wasted.

Two bells. He saluted the officer of the deck, then turned aft and saluted the ensign, and was on the gangplank, trying to contain himself, trying to keep from running. Finally he touched the soil; he was in Japan. It had been a long wait: high school, a year at a church college, boot camp. But it was all worth it; at last he was here, out in the big world, tasting it for real. Looking back at the ship, he saw that it was much bigger than he had realized, and much rustier. *Those swabbies are going to be busy*, he thought. *But I'm free and alive. Funny how the sun shines here just like on the other side of the world.*

He strode past scurrying dock hands and long warehouses with women working over bales of cloth. He was looking all about, often spinning around as he walked, trying to absorb it all and hurry too. Only four hours.

"You like maybe lide. Show you whole city. Kobe tocsan city. One fifty yen, one hour; three sixty yen, three hour."

He had come upon a group of jinrickshas, their drivers squatting around, smoking and chatting, waiting for customers from the ships. The first one, a monkey-faced, wizened, little old man, was the one that had spoken. His price agreed with a placard standing there. *Why not*, Jerry decided, *only a dollar for three hours.*

"Okay, for three hours."

"I take you maybe shop for to buy gift?"

"Sure."

"I take you velly good shop cheap." The old man settled into a seemingly slow, head bobbing jog, his shoulders bent far over the shafts.

Hey, this is great. Feel kinda sorry for the old man though. Still, it's pretty good pay for here, I guess.

The old man jogged quietly toward the modern business district, his feet padding gently on the wide cobbled street.

There was an industrial haze and some noise in the air, and signs everywhere of the war now nine years past. Empty foundations, piles of rubble, and skeleton buildings told a story that both Jerry and the old man were trying to forget. There were few people about and not much activity in the streets with the exception of scattered vending carts and their occasional customer. The carts fascinated Jerry; glass enclosed, some seemed to house candy, others emitted fry smells telling him of his growing hunger, all had the exotic touch he was searching for. In fact, the carts and the ricksha were his only real indications he wasn't in the Midwest. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to stop and buy.

Jerry looked out over his surroundings and then at the old man's sweating back. *That jog really eats up the distance. What a feeling being pulled like this. Something like a haircut or shoeshine. I think I can understand slavery a little.*

They were pulling up to an old brick building situated on a corner in an area full of other old buildings and vacant lots. It was more like the setting for a sheet metal shop than one for souvenirs, but the old man was stopping.

"We be here." He set down the shafts and, withdrawing a towel from his waist to mop his dripping forehead, he went back to help Jerry down. "This velly fine place."

"Ahh, please, welcome. You are Amelican maline, yes. I have many fine thing in shop. You look." The man stood just inside the open glass door; large, in a double-breasted blue suit, he wore gold rimmed banker's glasses. "Maybe you like — for you mother."

Jerry was looking for something for his mother, but not a jewelry box.

"This, how you say, mother pearl. Velly nice."

Jerry looked at it and enquired the price, but he wasn't interested; he didn't know what mother of pearl was anyhow. Then, he spotted the wood carvings; about double fist sized, one was of a man and ricksha, the other of a man wearing a shoulder yoke with two depending baskets.

"Those. How much are they?"

"Ahh yes, velly fine. 700 yen this one, 900 yen this one, both 1500 yen."

Jerry looked them over. *You must bargain*, he re-

membered; *they always jack up the price. They'd feel hurt if you didn't.*

"I give you 800 yen for both," Jerry found himself beginning to slip into the pidgin English.

"800 yen both, you kid." The proprietor laughed; the ricksha man smiled. Jerry felt a little hurt. *Maybe I overdid it.* But the man came back with: "I let go both 1400 yen."

"1000," Jerry said.

The man shook his head, "1400."

"1200"

"Ho kay, I tell you, 1300 low I able to go."

"I'll take it," Jerry said.

"You bargain good, you make fine Jap-nese," the man told him as he wrapped the carvings.

Jerry felt proud. This was the sort of thing he had read about. *Mom will like these, too,* he thought.

"Where you like go now? Maybe you like see Shinto temple or big store?"

Yeah, I want to see everything and eat someplace along the way too, huh?"

"Ho kay, what type place you like eat?"

"Any authorized place."

"Auth'rized, what this?"

"You know, a place with a big sign, letter A, it says its okay for military personnel," Jerry formed an A with his hands.

"Ahh yes, but this sign only place drink."

"No, it's for eating places too."

"Ho kay, we look. First maybe see big 'partment store?"

"Sure, let's go." Jerry climbed into the ricksha and they headed downtown again.

Desolate inactivity changed to bustling chaos as they moved further into the city. The traffic was getting heavy now. Cars, large and small, bicycles, scooters, pedestrians, motorcycles with truck bodies and other rickshas, all swam through the maelstrom in the streets, while modern skyscrapers hovered above and quaint shops fought for position along the sides. The old man would pause at an intersection, watch for a break, then dart across. *That's fine,* Jerry thought, *but what happens to me — the tail end of this outfit — if he ever misjudges?* But he never did.

Jerry was almost glad when they stopped, though he had to admit that this was what he had wanted, the Orient, and he was devouring it all.

The department store was similar to those in any city, big and modern, different departments on different floors. What fascinated Jerry was the contrast in the clothing of the customers — some of it occidental, some oriental. The click of high heels counterpointed the clack of wooden sandals. Western suits, skirts, and blouses vied with bright sashes and the traditional kimono to carry the theme. And never the twain shall meet. *He couldn't have been more wrong*, Jerry thought.

"We go next maybe Shinto temple?"

"Sure, and let's look for a place to eat too, okay?"

"Ho kay."

They passed many cabarets authorized with the blue A. but no restaurants. He was beginning to think the old man was right. *Oh, the hell with it. Why don't I just eat anyplace? I'm hungry.* He kept telling himself he would stop at the next place they came to, but thoughts of night soil and amoebic dysentery held him back. It was the old man who finally spotted the red A.

"Ahh yes, you right. You eat now?"

"I sure will, thanks a lot."

"I wait here, ho kay?"

"Yeah, I'll be right out." Jerry went in and sat down. The menu, like every other bit of writing he had seen here, was in both English and Japanese. Thinking of night soil again he passed up everything vegetable and settled finally on a ham sandwich. It was dry and tasteless and he wondered as he ate it if just maybe he wasn't on the wrong track. *Every occidental in town doesn't have time to mess around looking for one of these authorized joints. And there's no screens on the windows here, flies all over. How's this any better than anywhere else?* But as he drank his coffee he told himself, they wouldn't put these signs up if there wasn't a purpose. *I really should have tried some hot sake though. Oh well, there'll be other times.*

"You marry?" the old man asked him when he came out.

"Am I married, you mean? No."

"You have girl home maybe?"

"No."

"You maybe like see girl here."

Oh, that's what the old boy's driving at, Jerry thought. He's getting tired of pulling me around. Wants to stop awhile.

"No, I don't think so. Let's go look at the temple."

"Ho kay, we go."

They were passing through narrow streets now, wide enough only for pedestrians and rickshas. Open shops lined both sides, their canvas awnings arching across, often touching and eliminating the sky. This was the picture-book Orient which Jerry had been expecting. He stopped the old man at a book shop and browsed awhile; here were things that weren't in English. He finally bought a comic book for his little brother. *Tom ought to get a kick out of this.*

The cramped commercial area blended into an equally cramped residential one of bamboo and ricepaper shacks which led back into the open area of rubble piles and vacant lots. The old man pulled the ricksha up to a sign.

"Hot baths, velly nice josans work there," he pointed at the pictures on the sign. They showed towel clad Caucasians, which Jerry took to be American G I's, getting back-scrubs and rub-downs by pretty Japanese girls in white uniforms. Jerry felt a thrill crawl through him. *I'll have to try that sometime*, he thought.

"You like?"

"Very much, but not today; I haven't enough time."

"Ho kay, we see temple now."

The temple was well worth the trip. The torii gates, the stone lion dogs guarding the entrance and the curved roof pitch tied it far back in the traditions of the past — Jerry couldn't get enough pictures with his Brownie. The woven, straw-covered sake bottles stacked against one wall puzzled him.

"These for big celebration," the old man explained.

"Doesn't anyone try to steal them?"

"Man watch and nobody steal from holy place, many spirits here."

Sounds like a swinging religion. Jerry thought of his own

Midwestern Protestant background — dry in more than one respect. But it had its hold on him.

"I take you Japanese house now, ho kay?"

"Hey, that's great. Sure."

As they headed back into the residential area, Jerry tried to figure out the old man's generosity. *Either he and I are really getting along or that's the only way he can figure to get himself a break.*

When they stopped, it was before a two story bamboo house set flush with the street. It was connected with the other houses on the block by a high bamboo fence and apparently there was a yard back there. A lilac tree was struggling for growth against one wall. *This guy does all right; he must be just one member of a large family.*

The old man motioned him through the door. A middle-aged woman in a kimono and a high coiffure met them there in a sort of foyer, bowed low and smiled at Jerry. She pointed to his feet and, getting the idea, he sat down on the stoop which led to the main part of the house and removed his shoes.

"You 'melicans, tocsan feet!" she grinned at him again, handed him a pair of slippers — *funny they'd have my size* — and put his shoes in a drawer which she had pulled out of the wall. When she closed it, he could no longer tell where it was.

She motioned them in and, with the old man leading, they headed down the hall, their slippered feet padding silently on the smooth wooden floor. He could see a woman in a room beyond, playing with a baby. *I just wonder. Did I make my position clear?* The old man had turned and was starting up a stairway which consisted of a steep wooden stringer with horizontal steps set in it, each protruding about three inches. *I thought I did back there when he asked me if I was married.* He followed the old man up the steps, the woman behind him.

Reaching the top, they went down another hall and entered a room — a room completely devoid of furniture. The floor was covered with a thick matting and a vase with one flower stood in a wall niche; otherwise, there was nothing. But one wall was almost entirely ricepaper windows and

the sun's rays softened by these brown filters entered and lay gently over the room.

The woman disappeared. *I don't think I got my point across at all*, Jerry thought. He was right; she soon reappeared with a young, kimono-clad Japanese girl in tow.

"You no like this girl? I bring 'nother, if you like."

But Jerry hadn't even seen the girl. He was looking at her but seeing only the VD films of ulcerous organs and hearing only the words of the lecturer: "We have cures for syphilis and the clap, but in the Orient they have diseases we can't even classify, let alone cure." And somehow his mother and the church had gotten into this, too. But there was another side. His own desire and the situation — nothing this beautiful can be wrong — and other words from the past: "In Korea we have a bad VD problem because it is a Christian country and prostitution is suppressed; in Japan it's sanctioned and no problem at all." And the drunken tales of last night: "I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing, but the mama-san found out when liberty was up, took out enough money to cover cab fare and saw that I got back on time."

He focused on the girl finally, hoping he wasn't offending her.

"No, she's fine. It's just that — I don't feel like it now — I'll come back some other time."

